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Medieval Literature

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Annotated Bibliography: Saint Margaret & Hagiography

Bledsoe, Jenny C. “The Cult of St. Margaret of Antioch at Tarrant Crawford: The Saint’s Didactic Body and its Resonance for Religious Women”. *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*; Vol. 39 Issue 2. (2013). Academia.edu. 22 October 2014.

The single greatest uncover of my research as of yet is owed to a then-graduate-student of the University of Tennessee in 2011, Jenny C. Bledsoe. Bledsoe “specializes in high to late medieval religious literature, with a particular interest in the didactic goals, pastoral concerns, and models of holiness inherent in hagiography and devotional literature” and is now a part of the Emery English Department (Emery.edu). Throughout my readings of Teochimus’ story of St. Margaret, Caxton’s English translation of de Jacobus de Voragine “The Golden Legend: St. Margaret” and even commentaries on St. Margaret’s life, I was frustrated with and suspicious of the unyielding theme of chastity and childbirth in such a colorful, gruesome, charged story. Bledsoe’s research led to a thrilling discovery of gross violation of the St. Margaret’s story, I learned, to more pointedly preach the message of chastity for an audience of anchoresses, or nunnery, essentially, of female religious recluses:

“The author of the ‘Katherine Group’ [described as a ‘guide book’ for anchorites/anchoresses, in which saints’ lives were included] altered *The Life of St. Margaret* in order to emphasize certain characteristics that make the saint’s experience very much relatable to that of the anchoress. These changes alone indicate that the vitae of the ‘Katherine Group’ were intended for an isolated religious audience such as the anchoresses at Tarrant […] the ‘emphasis on the temptation of the flesh was deliberate,’ as ‘suggested by the author’s alterations of the Latin version in which he expands and emphasizes physical suffering.’ [It] also includes “a dramatic episode not found in any other known version of her life.” In this added segment, after St. Margaret conquers a demonic dragon, another demon appears and “explains how it has often ensnarled good people trying to lead clean lives” (Bledsoe, 177).

This is to say, the demon that appears to Margaret with whom she converses freely and demand of him his name and to know why he torments the children of God with temptation – did not appear in the original story. Overall it is not shocking that a story including a dragon had any falsities involved – but the fact that the first known embellishment has to do with the issue of female virginity is outrageous. What about other concepts, such as the demons, and the story of Margaret meeting a demon that King Solomon himself had bound, written several hundred years apart, both mention? Why, in a world where demons exist, is the female virginity so essential to salvation?

Caxton, William, translator. “The Golden Legend: St. Margaret” Compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, 1275. The Temple Classics. Edited by F.S. ELLIS First issue of this Edition, 1900. Reprinted 1922, 1931. Web. 14 Oct. 2014. Document URL <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume4.asp#Margare>

William Caxton translated “The Golden Legend: St. Margaret” in the 1400s, and, according to Wikipedia, died the year Columbus would discover the New World. Originally published in Italian more than seven hundred years ago, the stories of the saints that de Voragine collected were translated by William Caxton into English, including this translation of the original story of St. Margaret, including her purity, imprisonment, torture, discourse with demons, and eventual execution. There are revealing and key *additions* to the text, not seen in that authored by Teochimus. Also, interestingly, unlike Teochimus who claimed to have known Margaret and therefore absolutely believed her story, Caxton includes the original skepticism of de Voragine, who adds, after the miraculous immersion of Margaret from the dragon, “in another place it is said that he swallowed her into his belly, she making the sign of the cross […] so she issued out all whole and sound. This swallow and breaking of the belly of the dragon is said that it is apocryphal” (Caxton, 2). Yes, even miracles can be *too* miraculous.

Though skeptical of the miraculous here, de Voragine adds no doubt to the identity of the demon Margaret all but wrestles, which is *not found* in the original document we saw in class supposedly authored by one named Teochimus; Although the original document and Caxton agree that the demon came from a banishment of that of King Solomon, accidentally set free by the Babylonians, in the Teochimus document the demon only provides his identity as “”whatever my name may be, I have been man’s greatest foe after Beelzebub[[1]](#footnote-1)” (Teochimus, 7). Caxton/de Voragine’s version chillingly renders the demon’s name as “Veltis, one of them whom Solomon closed in a vessel of brass”, on whom much information concerning the event of being bound by King Solomon is available (Caxton, 2). The identity of the demon opens a *world* of information.

The translation also refers to the villain Olybrius as “provost”, or “Provost Olybrius” in quite a few places. The old translation of provost involves definitions that refer both to a clerical (Olybrius is even referred to as “the minister” in one instance) or a bailiff, which suggests incarceration related work; this could be a word play on part of the author, be it de Voragine or Caxton, however, is impossible to tell. More outstanding in this version also is the conversion of and *beheading* of five thousand men (not including women and children according to Teochimus (Teochimus, 7)) – a detail easily over looked in Teochimus’ version simply because it is so dense and drawn out; does the immediate execution of five thousand converts still qualify as miraculous? And if so, isn’t this a larger sacrifice than Margaret’s?

Reames, Sherry L., “Margaret of Antioch” *Middle English Legends of Women Saints.* Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publication, 2003. Web. 14 Oct. 2014. Document URL <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/reames-middle-english-legends-of-women-saints-margaret-of-antioch-introduction>

Reames is an English professor of Wisconsin University, and is involved in Medieval English. She is the editor of a great number of books concerning medieval texts, an example of which is accessible at the University of Rochester website ([http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/ creator/sherry-reames](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/%20creator/sherry-reames)). Reames founded the Hagiography Society in 1990. The “Sherry L. Reames Graduate Student Travel Award for Hagiographical Studies”, funded by the Hagiography Society, provides a student with a staggering three hundred dollars “to be used toward travel to present at the [International Congress on Medieval Studies](http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/congress/), held annually at the University of Western Michigan in Kalamazoo, Michigan.”

Reames discussion of the legend of St. Margaret, provides readers with a background understanding of how the story both inspired and frustrated its readers: “Despite clerical discomfort with the dragon scene, it could not be dropped completely from vernacular lives of Margret because it served as the source for familiar iconography of this saint” (Reames, 1). This would be due to the fact that a “wide range of believers might turn to this saint in times of trouble, [including] petitions for the preservation of chastity, safe childbirth and healthy offspring, protection from other kinds of danger, and forgiveness of sins” (Reames 1).

Despite the length, breadth and depth of the spirituality of the story, imagery (including dragons!), spirituality, mention of heaven, hell, demons, and brutalities, an allusion to the tension of a spiritual war that takes place between God and Satan over every soul, “In most versions of the legend, the devil’s main target is chastity”; not murder, lies, greed or any of the deadly sins (Reames, 2). The focus on sexuality – whether chastity or the results of reproduction – is troublesome to me. Surely if a man had emerged from the dragon (as men are born too!) his patronage would not be childbirth. If a man stepped out of the dragon, he may very likely be the patron saint of soldiers. It is honorable to the character of Margaret (a young, brave woman) that she is remembered for more than simply being a virgin, but for being strong and steadfast and is called upon by many.

Sands, Tracey R., “Saints and Politics During the Kalmar Period.” *Scandinavian Studies* *World History in Context*. Issue 80. 2008. 141. Web. 14 Oct. 2014.

<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/whic/AcademicJournalsDetailsPage/AcademicJournalsDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=WHIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Journals&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=WHIC%3AUHIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CA190697908&source=Bookmark&u=mlin_c_fitchcol&jsid=83b459bef20bc1fd08ef9dc0032c817a>

Tracey R. Sands has a doctorate in Scandinavian Studies from the University of Washington, as well as a Master's degree in Folklore and Mythology, and has reportedly taught at a number of universities throughout the United States, including the University of Colorado. Within “Saints and Politics During the Kalmar Period” Sands studies the use of Saint Margaret in artwork discovered during the Kalmar Period, and her use as a political sign to a singular Swedish lord, essentially. It was through Sands’ work that I first learned that saints are often accompanied by an “attribute […] a visual marker of a saint’s identity, [which are] typically derived from some aspects of the saint’s legend, often the instruments of torture used against him or her, and/or the actual instrument of martyrdom” (Sands, 150). Tying the above two concepts together, the founder of the church and Swedish political player used St. Margaret in a starring role, not only with her typical attribute of a “small dragon” but “[wearing] a crown, which is unusual” (Sands, 154). Sands commentary on the many uses of and practice of praying to saints was made clearer through this passage, as I formerly had a limited understanding of why one would pray to or be a “devotee” of the deceased.

“Saints and their images fulfill several different functions for their devotees; [they] may serve as examples of behavior to emulate (or at least aspire to) but also, perhaps even more importantly, as intercessors, who, because of their particular closeness to Christ, can please the case of a devotee. To these two, [Sands] would add that saints serve a symbolic function, as a reference to a person, cause or idea not directly related to the saint’s legend” (Sands, 142).

Though Sands seemed to be much more interested in politics and government than the title or her article or abstract led on, Sands did provide me with an invaluable, very small phrase that opened up a great deal of research to me, without which I would have had a great deal of trouble: “*the cult* of the saints” (Sands, 147). Initially alarmed by this phrase, as “cult” has rather negative connotations today, I began to research “the cult of St. Margaret of Antioch” which led to the next source in my research journey.

Teochimus. “The Life and Passion of St. Margaret.” Broadview Press. 2009. p.1-13. http://sites.broadviewpress. com/bablonline/files/2012/05/Vol-1-Web-Life-of-Saint-Margaret2.pdf. 6 October 2014.

Although slight variations in *The Life of St. Margaret* of Antioch exists, a few of which have been mentioned already, the version supposedly recorded by one Teochimus remains the mostly widely read. However, at the end of my research – though I began with Teochimus’ story and end this annotation with it as well – I feel more questions than answers have been uncovered in my study of Saint Margaret. Margaret was supposedly a young woman, a virgin, her devoutness to Jesus Christ causing her to be the object of contempt for her father, who was “a patriarch and prince of heathen people” (Teochimus, 2). After being spotted in the field while tending her father’s flock (an allusion to Christ perhaps?) by a “child of the devil”, Olibrius, in this rendition referred to as “the ruler of the land, who condemned and destroyed all the followers of the living God” is bent upon either having her “as my wife [or] as a concubine” (Teochimus, 3). So a number of paragraphs pass with the villain asking and torturing the poor girl, as she continues to speak of her love of Christ, saying such things to infuriate him as, “I, a maiden, have given him [Christ] my maidenhood, and love him as a beloved and believe in him as Lord” (Teochimus, 3).

Most interestingly, and what may very well set her apart from other saints, is the incarnation of the devil as a dragon while she is imprisoned: “Suddenly there came towards her out of a corner a devil from hell in the form of a dragon” (Teochimus, 5). The devil-dragon swallows her hole, but upon making the sign of the cross, “his body burst in two down the middle” and the woman is unscathed (Teochimus, 6). After this the dragon is swallowed back up into hell, but Margaret is not alone for long – shortly after a demon arrives to talk with her about “What [she] wished to know: where we [demons] most live, and why we most hate and harry maidens” (Teochimus, 9) – that is, because “through the power of maidenhood [virginity] was mankind redeemed [“by the heavenly queen”], and all that we owned taken and bereft us” (Teochimus, 9). How shocking it is to the morale of this tale, as I learned in later research, that most of this demonic monologue was added by a monk, most likely, writing to nuns. As much of Margaret’s tale that remains without it, that is brave and admirable, it is a bit insulting to boil it down to a girl’s virginity.

At first apprehensive of my random choice of St. Margaret as my project subject, secondly weary of the density of it, I am finally very proud of her story, what she accomplished (fiction or not) and what she can teach women today – empowerment.

1. That is the original fallen angel, Satan or Lucifer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)